



World Conference on Psychology and Sociology 2012

Commuters' Psychosocial Profile and Their Involvement in Child Rearing at Home

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Abstract

The “commuter family” is recently on the rise in Malaysia. Though the impact of commuter families in maintaining the balance and harmony among family members remains debatable, studies relevant to this topic have been lacking in Malaysia. This paper aims to investigate the impact of commuter family on the commuters' psychosocial state and their children's education. Using the qualitative approach, a total of 14 commuters were interviewed. Findings suggested that commuters with positive psychosocial characteristics had less emotional problems when handling children education as well as relationships with family members and friends. In contrast, commuters with negative psychosocial characteristics have more communication and family-related problems. In summary, the issues surrounding commuter families need to be addressed to ensure that family types do not affect over the years, the stability and harmony of the family institution in Malaysia and elsewhere.

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Selection and peer review under the responsibility of Prof. Dr. Kobus Maree, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Keywords: Commuter Families, Psychosocial Profile, Education at Home, Parental Involvement;

1. Introduction

Commuter marriages are defined as married couples who (mostly due to work demands) agree to maintain two residences in different geographical locations and are separated from each other at least three nights per week for a minimum period of three months (Grestel & Gross, 1982; Orton & Crossman, 1983). Commuter families are becoming more common nowadays in Malaysia, especially among young couples who have their own careers and ambitions. There are a number of factors contributing to the increasing number of commuter families. Among the most common reasons are the increasing households with dual-careers couples, financial and societal demands; and the need to maintain and enhance careers (Ferk, 2005). Previous studies have identified the benefits and challenges faced by those who tried to live as commuter families (Jackson, Brown, & Patterson-Stewart, 2000). Among the benefits were i) increasing levels of autonomy and self-esteem, self-respect

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and confidence; ii) opportunities for career enhancement without the constraints of the family's daily business; iii) increased opportunities to leverage the acquired knowledge and education; and iv) fulfillment of psychological needs, involving building self-identity. For commuter couples, long-distance relationships can make partners more aware of the existence of each other, and this leads to a higher quality of communication. On the other hand, the challenges included: i) the pressures of dividing time and energy in a balanced way between the demands of family and career; ii) feeling lonely; iii) lack of understanding from other people regarding the difficulties faced; and iv) lack of time to do many things (that normal families take for granted). Stutzer and Frey (2007) suggested that life of commuter families not only involves the time spent on commuting journey every week, but also the financial cost and emotional problems like stress, anxiety, lack of motivation, consequently affects the health and quality of life in the family. In addition, there are also social costs such as impact on relationships with spouses, family and friends.

This study seeks to investigate the psychosocial profiles of commuter respondents. In this study, psychosocial profile was gauged in terms of dimensional changes in relationships with others, emotions, hard work and anxiety or stress. This study also attempts to get more in-depth information on how commuters handle their children's education while living separately. Epstein (1985) found that encouragement, activities and interests of parents in the home and their involvement in the school and classroom contribute to a positive influence even after taking into account the abilities and background of their economic status. In addition, parents are the first educators for their children and they greatly influence the children's character development values.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study utilized a mixed method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative descriptive survey design was used to gather general information from a large number of commuters, whereas the qualitative approach was used to get more in-depth information on some interesting patterns.

The sample was drawn from the people using the public bus service to commute on weekends. The respondents were commuters that used the public transport services at three major bus stations in the Klang Valley, where a number of ministries, agencies, universities and private companies are located. On Fridays, these stations are normally loaded with commuters who use the bus services to return to their hometowns located in the northern eastern and southern states.

2.2. Procedure

A simple questionnaire to gather the names and contacts of commuters and a brief pamphlet explaining the intended study were given out to the various bus service providers, and they were asked to distribute them in their respective buses. The passengers who fulfilled the criteria of commuters and were interested to participate in the study were asked to give their contacts and also nominate other commuters in their workplace. Based on this information, the respective offices identified as having large number of commuters were contacted to request permission to engage their staff in the study. Then, trained enumerators were sent to these offices to give out the set of questionnaires to the respondents. The commuters, who fulfilled the criteria for the study, were invited to join the study. These commuters were also asked to nominate other commuters at the office where they are working. Thus, snowballing technique was used to recruit a larger number of participants.

2.3. Sample

The respondents in the study were married commuters who lived separately from their families, and only went home on weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis. A pool of 293 respondents was identified; these respondents were asked to complete the questionnaires, either at the bus stations or at their respective offices. After omitting incomplete data and outliers, a total of 224 were finally confirmed as reliable and used in the study.

2.4. Instrument and measurements

The data was collected using a questionnaire specifically developed to enable researchers to gather information related to the challenges faced by commuters and their families and the impact of these challenges. The questionnaire consists of several sections including (i) respondents' view of commuting (positive or negative), psychosocial aspects, involvement in child rearing and inculcating their moral values. The researchers referred to previous studies and existing instruments to come up with items that measure the intended constructs. These items were verified by panel of experts in the field of study. The reliability analysis was conducted to determine the reliability of the instrument; all items included in the questionnaire met the psychometric standards of a Cronbach Alpha of not less than 0.70).

3. Results and discussion

The findings showed that out of 224 respondents, 30 (13.39%) felt positive about becoming commuters (categorized as positive commuters), while 194 (86.6%) felt negative about it (categorized as negative commuters). The positive commuters are mostly male (90%), and a majority of them work with the private sector (73.3%). The majority of positive commuters stated career advancement as the reason why they commute (31%), followed by better pay (20.7%), better job (20.7%), employer's directive (20.7%) and others (6.9%). On the other hand, most negative commuters stated the reason for commuting as employer's directive (48.7%), better pay (20.2%), better job (13.5%), career advancement (11.4%) and others (6.2%).

3.1 Psychosocial profile

Comparison between these two groups of respondents in their psychosocial profile resulted in finding significant distinctive patterns. Positive commuters have significantly better overall psychosocial scores ($M=3.33$) than negative commuters ($M=3.01$), $t(32.95)=3.36$, $p<.05$. They scored significantly higher in emotional state ($M=3.31$) as compared to the negative commuters ($M=3.02$). Positive commuters also scored lower in "Anxiety and Stress" ($M=2.39$) as compared to negative commuters ($M=2.77$), $t(215)=-3.77$, $p<.05$. Among the changes gathered from qualitative data are that commuting taught them to be "more patient", "have better control of emotions" and "to always think and feel positive". However, these positive changes were reported by only 13.39% of commuters, while 86.6% reported becoming "depressed" and "angry". Interviews revealed issues such as "feeling guilty and worried for their family members", "becoming more sensitive and easily upset", "worried about spouse's loyalty" and "feeling miserable when can't entertain or give attention to spouse and children when needed" (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison between positive and negative commuters in their psychosocial profiles

Variable	Commuter type	Mean	SD	t value	df	p value
Overall psychosocial*	Positif	3.33	0.48	3.631	32.945	0.001
	Negatif	3.01	0.31			
Relationship with others	Positif	3.07	0.58	0.048	222	0.962
	Negatif	3.06	0.51			
Emotional state*	Positif	3.31	0.66	2.275	32.44	0.03
	Negatif	3.02	0.47			
Anxiety and stress*	Positif	2.39	0.50	-3.767	215	0.00
	Negatif	2.77	0.53			

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

However, there was no significant difference between the two groups in their “relationship with others”, $t(222)=.048$, $p>.05$. Findings from interview show that commuters form a new circle of close friends at work to socialize with to compensate for what they lose (friendship and socializing with neighbours, relatives and community). Some commuters reported that colleagues are more sympathetic and try to entertain them knowing the fact that they are far from their families.

3.2 Job Performance

As expected, positive commuters show significantly higher scores on job performance ($M=3.37$) compared to negative commuters ($M=2.99$), $t(32.54)=3.75$, $p<.05$. Among interesting reasons given by positive commuters for their increase in job performance after becoming commuters are “the absence of family commitments that can affect work efficiency”, “able to focus fully on work”, “able to work extra hours on workdays”, and “family is more understanding and give full support”. It appears that commuting made them and their families value and appreciate each and every second. They will try to complete all their work on time or before time to ensure that they are able to spend quality time with their families during the weekends. Spouses and children also take extra steps in “covering” for the commuters’ roles on the weekdays, showing increase in maturity and responsibility.

3.3 Involvement in child rearing at home

In this study, commuters’ involvement in child rearing is measured through their frequency of having quality discussions or “talks” related to issues such as education, personal problems and friends with their children. It was found that for the positive commuters, the increase in discussions related to education, friends and expenses is more prominent. There were issues that might either be perceived of less importance, or too complex/time consuming to handle, and thus less discussed such as friends, personal problems, boy/girlfriend and attire. However the non-existent discussion on emotional problems for a significant number of positive commuters (30%) perhaps reflects that this is not a serious issue among the families of positive commuters.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage of having discussions with children among positive and negative commuters

Issues	Frequency of Discussion with Children							
	Positive (N=30)				Negative (N=194)			
	More frequent	The same	Less frequent	Never	More frequent	The same	Less frequent	Never
Education	55	25	10	10	28.8	30.5	30.5	10.2
Friends	45	25	25	5	17.8	39	33.1	10.2
Expenses	40	40	15	15	29.3	42.2	18.1	10.3
Personal problems	20	45	25	10	24.8	36.8	25.6	12.8
Emotional problems	25	35	10	30				
					20.7	33.5	35.3	10.3
Attire	30	40	20	10	17.9	42.7	27.4	12
Ambition	35	40	15	10	22.4	45.7	19.8	12.1
Boy/Girlfriend								
	15.8	36.8	21.1	26.3	7.4	41.7	23.1	27.8

The findings for the negative commuters show that although a majority of them reported that frequency of discussions were the same or became less after commuting, some aspects show significant reductions are education, friends and emotional problems. This is an area of concern as the issues less discussed are among serious and most important aspects for most children and adolescents.

This finding is in line with previous studies that highlighted child rearing, guilt, emerging problems, limited time and social pressure as among common issues faced by commuting parents (Carter, 1992; Jackson et al, 2000; Magnuson & Norem, 1999).

4. Conclusion

This study showed that the patterns of commuters' psychosocial profiles and their involvement in child rearing at home are best viewed from two different perspectives. They are the positive commuters who embrace commuting life with a positive attitude and manage to adapt well to this new lifestyle, and the negative commuters who could not adapt to this way of life and feels that it disrupts their functions both as a family member and as a worker. These two different mindsets ultimately lead to other psychosocial aspects such as their states of emotions, anxiety and stress. The mindsets also resulted in different patterns of involvement in child rearing at home. What would be interesting is to investigate the factors leading to the different mindsets.

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